



United
States
Department
of
Agriculture

Salmon-
Challis
National
Forest



Rockhounding, Prospecting, and Fossil Hunting on the Salmon-Challis National Forest



Your national forests and grasslands are a great place to experience a wide range of recreational opportunities. Prospecting, rockhounding, and fossil hunting are among the many outdoor pursuits visitors enjoy on the Salmon-Challis National Forest.

What is prospecting, rockhounding, and fossil hunting?

Rockhounding involves the searching and collection of small quantities of common variety rocks, gems, or other geologic materials for personal use or enjoyment.

Prospecting is searching for valuable minerals. This can range from collecting hand samples of mineralized rock and gold panning, to using metal detectors and operating small non-motorized sluices as long as they “do not cause significant surface disturbance” 36 CFR 228.4a(1)(iv).

Forest Service mining regulations listed at 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 228, Subpart A and C, govern prospecting and rockhounding activities.

Fossil hunting allows the collection of petrified wood, invertebrate and plant fossils for personal use. Invertebrate fossils, such as clams, do not have an internal skeleton. Collection of vertebrate (has internal skeleton) fossils requires a permit (36 CFR 261.9i). The rules for petrified wood collection are found under 36 CFR 228, Subpart C.

Be advised that unauthorized collection of archaeological artifacts, such as arrowheads, old bottles, other historic artifacts etc. is prohibited on National Forest lands.

How can I determine if a permit is required for my forest activities?

Prospecting, rockhounding, petrified wood, and invertebrate and plant fossil hunting usually do not require a permit when there is little or no disturbance to the ground, other resources, and environment. Check with the local ranger district if you have questions on whether a permit may be needed. For example, a free use permit may be required for removal of mineral materials. A Notice Of Intent (NOI) for prospecting activities which might cause significant disturbance should be submitted to the District Ranger. In part, this means if you plan to:

- Use explosives
- Use power equipment for excavation
- Drive vehicles off public roads or trails
- Clear or remove vegetation
- Store petroleum products or other hazardous or flammable material near streams
- Camp in one place for more than 16 days

Based on the complexity (or scope) of your proposal as stated in the NOI, a Plan of Operation may be required. Forest users should be sensitive to how their activities affect the environment. Rockhounds and prospectors need to carefully refill and vegetate any excavation, no matter how small.

Water quality and fish habitat are critical concerns on national forests and grasslands, so activities in or near streams must be handled with special care. Consideration should also be given to possible cumulative effects when you do the same activity year after year in the same place.

Any sale or commercial use of petrified wood found on lands administered by the Forest Service requires a permit. A free use permit is required for amateur collectors and scientists to take limited quantities for personal use.

Are all national forest lands available for prospecting?

Some areas may be excluded. Examples include:

- Wild and Scenic River corridors
- Historical or archeological sites
- Campgrounds
- Wilderness Areas
- Administrative sites
- Areas “withdrawn” from mineral entry



In addition, you should not work on someone else’s “mining claim” without permission.

Claimants have rights to valuable mineral deposits on those sites. Claim information can also be found at www.blm.gov/lr2000.

Are there any special restrictions that apply to suction dredging?

State and federal permits may be required. Please contact the Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR) or review the following website which has more information related to state guidelines: www.idwr.idaho.gov/forms/streams.html

Please contact the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or review the following website which has more information related to EPA guidelines suction dredging: www.epa.gov/cwa-404/permit-program-under-cwa-section-404

Also, because of the potential effects to streams and fish habitat from suction dredging activities, a NOI should be submitted to the appropriate District Ranger to determine if a plan of operations is necessary.

The Forest Service regulations apply even if you are a member of a group, such as the of Gold Prospectors Assn. of America. In Idaho waterways, your NOI will only apply to the specific area you designate and the actual dates you propose to the agencies.

Where should I go to enjoy prospecting, rockhounding, and fossil hunting on the national forests?

The Salmon-Challis National Forest does not have formally designated mineral collecting areas. However, local groups and rock shops can provide more information. There are also several books on rockhounding in Idaho.

Fossils vary in abundance depending on the age of the rocks exposed at the surface. Check with the Forest Service offices listed for geologic and fossil information.



For safety reasons, do not go into abandoned mines!

General Guidelines for Mining and Ground Disturbance on the Salmon-Challis National Forest

If your Operation:	You will need:	From
Will cause little or no surface disturbance (e.g., gold panning, fossil hunting, and rockhounding).	No permit or Notice of Intent is needed — although some restriction may apply depending on the area. Check with the Ranger District.	Forest Service
Will involve collecting less than 1/4 ton of flag-stone, rubble, sand, gravel, or similar material by hand for personal (noncommercial) use.	A Free-Use Permit for the mineral material is needed. Check with the Ranger District.	Forest Service
Uses a small sluice or rocker box.	May require a Notice of Intent May require a Recreational Mining Permit	Forest Service IDWR
Uses a suction dredge with up to a 5" suction hose and/or with an engine rating up to 15 horsepower.	Notice of Intent* Recreational Mining Permit NPDES Permit	Forest Service IDWR EPA
Uses motorized earth moving equipment and/or will likely cause significant surface disturbance.	Plan of Operation Other federal and state permits may apply	Forest Service

**Depending on location land ownership, and scope of operations, a Notice of Intent could be elevated by the District Ranger to a Plan of Operations and which could lead to an environmental analysis, involvement of additional agencies, and/or additional permits.*

Where do I go for more information?

The best way to ensure a bright future for recreational prospecting, rockhounding, and fossil collecting on public lands is to comply with state and federal regulations. Start by bringing your questions or concerns to any appropriate agency in the area you plan to work. Call one of the District Offices below to get connected with the appropriate ranger district.

Salmon-Challis National Forest Supervisor's Office 1206 S. Challis Street Salmon, ID 83467 (208) 756-5100	Leadore Ranger District 103 Ranger Street P.O. Box 180 Hwy 28 Leadore, ID 83464 (208) 768-2500	North Fork Ranger District 11 Casey Road P.O. Box 180 North Fork, ID 83466 (208) 865-2700
	Lost River Ranger District 716 W. Custer P.O. Box 507 Mackay, ID 83251 (208) 588-3400	Salmon/Cobalt Ranger District 311 McPherson Street Salmon, ID 83467 (208) 756-5200
Challis-Yankee Fork Ranger District 311 N. US Highway 93 Challis, ID 83226 (208) 879-4100	Middle Fork Ranger District 311 N. US Highway 93 Challis, ID 83226 (208) 879-4101	
Environmental Protection Agency 950 W Bannock, Suite 900 Boise, ID 83702 (208) 378-5746	Idaho Dept. of Water Resources 102 S. Warpath Street Salmon, ID 83467 (208) 742-0658	Bureau of Land Management 1206 S. Challis Street Salmon, ID 83467 (208) 756-5400

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